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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: March 9, 1956

SUBJECT: Attitude of the Population of the Soviet Zone

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Richard Balken, Political Officer,
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany
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On March 9 Mr. Balken, Political Officer of the German Embassy, orally summarized a report from the Berlin Office of the Foreign Office of the Federal Government concerning attitudes of the population of the Soviet Zone. It dealt with attitudes as of December 1955, therefore after the visit of the Chancellor and the German Delegation to Moscow and after the Geneva Meetings. Mr. Balken felt that the report was reliable and well-balanced. Mr. Balken requested specifically that it not be indicated in any way to the Federal Government in Bonn or its representative in Berlin that we had been given this information.

Despite the Geneva meetings and the visit to Moscow, the people of the Soviet Zone retained strong hope of German reunification. This hope enabled many to remain in the Zone, although it is true that large numbers have been moving to West Germany and many others would have gone but have been hindered by winter weather. Remaining in the Soviet Zone requires compromise with the Government. It means deceit and lying. Speakers and other participants at SED-sponsored meetings tend to lie and know that others are lying. It is possible that the surface appearance has misled the SED machine into greater confidence than was justified by the true attitudes of the people toward it.

Despite the inner resistance to the regime a certain erosion of attitude is taking place in the long run. Time is definitely in favor of the Communists. Resignation is penetrating the adults. Youths who have been brought up in nothing but Communist schools are already reaching the universities. Even adults and those among the youths who have been against the Communist regime have acquired an anti-Western attitude based on the constant flow of locally uncontroverted statements concerning the West. Being anti-Communist is not automatically the same as being pro-West.

Denunciation

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Denunciation has become more frequent and is occasioned by even less derogatory remarks than formerly. Despite privileged status at the university thought control has become particularly sharp. For a seemingly harmless expression which however was not in line with SED propaganda a girl from the university was sentenced for one year probation in the mines. Distrust continues to eat away at family and community relations. Pro-Western organizations have been eliminated. The usefulness of other organizations for spreading pro-Western ideas and sentiments has, except for the church, been totally destroyed. Only the church remains to bind West Germans and East Germans in a common ideology. It is simply a fact that gradually East Germans and West Germans are becoming different people. The younger people are so accustomed to mental regimentation that they sometimes do not know how to discuss nor what to do with their liberty when they reach the West. Even today the attitude of the West in connection with the evidence of June 17, 1953 is heavily criticized. Although one did not expect that Western troops would hurry to the help of the revolted elements, one had hoped at least that there would have been a strong intervention on the part of the West if only in the form of radio calls for a general strike. One assumes generally in the Soviet Zone that a general strike would cause the breakdown of the economy of the Soviet Zone which operates without reserves and would have forced Moscow into negotiations, concerning the responsibility of the Soviets for the territory which had become a liability to them. At first the evidence of June 17 doubtless increased the sense of confidence of the people of the Soviet Zone although it is not clear to what extent people are thinking of repeating the episode. It is believed that the majority would regard a repetition of the revolt as a stupidity in view of the security system developed in the Soviet Zone since June 17, 1953. On the other hand, there seems to be a latent fermentation going on among the workers which could break to the surface if given an occasion promising success.

East German popular criticism of propaganda directed at the Soviet Zone from the West includes the view that the propaganda centering in the full shop window displays of West Berlin is overdone and not too well appreciated by people in the Soviet Zone. It is considered too boastful. The reaction tends to be we are not interested so much in the consumer goods as we are in the liberation from the tyranny and lack of personal liberty.

Propaganda painting the economic situation in the Soviet Zone as catastrophic is ineffective. Things are simply not as bad as painted in many cases. The food situation is not too bad in industrial areas in which there is part-time farming or gardening combined with industrial work. Furthermore, there is a certain pride in what had been accomplished on the part of the workers who have rebuilt the industries. Depreciation of what they have accomplished runs counter to their pride and sense of achievement. Calling things black or what is not realistic and tends to undercut the effectiveness of the propaganda.

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What the people of the Soviet Zone want is more visits of political leaders in West Berlin. These are construed as expressions of solidarity with people of the Soviet Zone. Contrary to expectation, repetition of strong Western Allied determination to unify Germany has never become a drug on the market as far as the East Zone population was concerned. Above all the Soviet Zone Germans feel that the West must not give the impression that it is content to let the situation stabilize. Thus far the West had seemed to be too defensive, that is to restrict its activities to reactions against moves made by the East. Its actions should become aggressive. It should take the initiative.

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